They report moving away from their homes for three main reasons:

1. to get away from punitive laws and law enforcement practices.
2. to avoid discrimination and prejudice.
3. to make a better life for themselves and their dependents.

Migrant sex workers contribute to the local economies where they work, and also benefit their economies at home by sending remittances.

Migrant sex workers face a number of challenges including xenophobia from local sex workers and health and social service-providers, language and cultural barriers, as well as restrictive migration laws and enforcement.

Facts about migrant sex workers

Some sex workers are migrants who move far away from their homes to make a better life for themselves and their families.

In an increasingly globalised world, people move for a variety of reasons – to earn money, to access new opportunities, to improve their lives, to have new experiences, or to escape from difficult circumstances. Sex workers are no different.

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The popular assumption that migrant sex workers are victims of trafficking, increases their vulnerability to Raid and Rescue operations, increased stigma, and other human rights violations.

Definitions

International migrant: A person who moves to another country (for whatever reason). In 2019, there were an estimated 272 million international migrants globally (only 3.5% of the world’s population).

Economic migrant: A person who moves to another country primarily motivated by economic opportunities.

Asylum seeker: A person who seeks protection from persecution.

Refugee: A person who has crossed an international border for reasons of actual or feared persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (including gender). In 2019, there were an estimated 25.9 million refugees worldwide.

Internally displaced person: A person who has been forced to flee to avoid the effects of armed conflict, violence, violations of human rights or natural disasters, and who has not crossed an internationally recognised State border.
People seeking health and social services should be secure that their information will remain confidential and that service-providers will not alert authorities about their immigration status. For example, if a sex worker is undocumented and they don’t trust the health care system to protect their information, they will not seek the health, social and legal services they need. Maintaining the integrity of this private information is often called a ‘firewall’.

The importance of firewalled health and social services

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CASE STUDY
The impact of restrictive migration policies

This is an example from the United Kingdom (UK) during political discussions on whether the UK would leave the European Union (EU) – a process popularly called Brexit:

“As the clock ticks down to Brexit, EU sex workers, living and working in the UK, are demanding the right to stay on the basis of their work and the contribution they are making to the survival of families and even communities. Sex workers are disadvantaged and discriminated against because sex work isn’t recognised as work in the UK. Many people therefore don’t have the documentation, including the record of waged work, that is needed to establish a right to stay in the UK. Arrests and deportations of EU migrant sex workers have been rising, particularly since the Brexit referendum in 2016.”

English Collective of Prostitutes (2019)

What is Needed

- Challenge restrictive and discriminatory migration laws to ensure safe and legal migration.
- Decriminalise sex work and repeal laws and policies that discriminate against migrant sex workers.
- Educate and sensitise legal, social and health care workers, as well as non-clinical personnel who serve as gate-keepers to services related to sex work and migration. Ensure the provision of non-judgemental, migration-aware and confidential services.
- Ensure that all migrant sex workers have access to support, services and to justice without threat of deportation.
- Support community-led projects that provide services to sex workers and migrants, and ensure meaningful involvement of migrant sex workers in the design and delivery of these services.